

Exodus 20:8-11

"The Fourth Commandment"

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy."

The Fourth Commandment, which enjoins Sabbath observance upon the broad community of Israel, is often regarded among the two positive commandments (along with the Fifth Commandment enjoining honor for father and mother [Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16]), insomuch that the Fourth Commandment is not intended to be prohibitive, but instead be something positive for the people of God. There are differences between the Exodus 20:8-11 delivery of the Fourth Commandment beginning with "remember," and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 beginning with "observe." Exodus 20:8-11 roots the institution of the Sabbath within Creation (cf. Genesis 2:1-3), whereas Deuteronomy 5:12-15 roots it within Israel's deliverance via the Exodus. Conservative readers of the Torah, adhering to Mosaic authorship and/or oversight, would argue that any differences between these passages are only slight, perhaps with the latter emphasizing a scene of Ancient Israel getting ready to enter into the Promised Land. In contrast, the critical tradition would note Exodus 20:8-11 including a combination of the so-called P source or Priestly writer, along with the so-called D source or Deuteronomist at work, perhaps with D being older.¹

More broadly, for sure, is how even those who adhere to the JEDP documentary hypothesis, still have to treat Exodus 20:8-11 in its final form, with the Fourth Commandment placed among the Ten Commandments. Jeffrey H. Tigay remarks in *The Jewish Study Bible* how "This is the longest commandment in the Decalogue, indicating the sabbath's importance as one of the quintessential expressions of loyalty to God."² John I. Durham also asserts, "The fourth commandment is the longest in the Decalogue, because it is the most expanded of all the commandments. No other commandment has received as much reapplication and as many defining and justifying clauses as this one."³

As readers of Exodus 20:8-11 discover, it is not only the rest that God enjoins upon His people generally that should strike us—but the all-encompassing categories of those, who otherwise might be discluded from rest, which are included. This not only communicates an important message about the character of God in relation to the human beings He has created, but also how all—and not just some—need rest and refreshment, and how no perceived group of superior people are to rest at the expense of others' labor.

20:8 The Fourth Commandment opens with the direction, "Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it" (ATS), or "Remember the sabbath day to hallow it" (Alter), *zakor et-yom*

¹ Cf. Noth, *Exodus*, 164; Childs, *Exodus*, pp 415-417; John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus*, Vol 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 290.

² Tigay, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 149.

³ Durham, 288.

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haShabbat l'qadesh (וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת-יְוָם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְשׁוֹ). Here, the verb *zakar* (זָכַר), appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice) would mainly involve, “to **remember**, to **call to mind** tech. expression in legislation” (*HALOT*).⁴ The Keter Crown Bible actually renders it as “Commemorate.” Certainly while there may be some variance of opinion between those who see “remember” in Exodus 20:8 and “observe” in Deuteronomy 5:12, the issue of “remembering” the Sabbath here, does involve those who observe it, recalling the Sabbath’s origins in the rest or cessation from work that God undertook in Genesis 2:1-3. The message of “Recall the Sabbath day...,” would be to direct not just the Israelites to the need to remember to keep it, but also to be conscious of its origins. Nahum M. Sarna does appropriately direct,

“The Sabbath is wholly an Israelite innovation. There is nothing analogous to it in the entire ancient Near Eastern world...The Sabbath...is completely disassociated from the movement of celestial bodies. This singularity, together with Creation as the basis for the institution, expresses the quintessential idea of Israel’s monotheism: God is entirely outside of and sovereign over nature.”⁵

Durham addresses the relationship of the Hebrew noun *Shabbat* to the verb *shavat*, which in Exodus 20:8-11 has an unambiguous association:

“There is a wide agreement that the institution of the sabbath is an ancient one in Israel, and that the noun שָׁבַת belongs to the semantic field of שָׁבַת ‘rest, cease.’ The OT clearly uses שָׁבַת as a term denoting a day of cessation, for religious reasons, from the normal daily routine. שָׁבַת is a day of ‘stopping,’ a day designed to interrupt the normal activity of work, and a definite and fixed day.”⁶

Evaluating how the institution of the Sabbath has been approached in much Protestant Reformed thought, Walter C. Kaiser draws the conclusion, “The command to remember the Sabbath is *moral* insofar as it requires of a person a due portion of his or her time dedicated to the worship and service of God, but it is *ceremonial* in that it prescribes the seventh day.”⁷ In his Exodus commentary here, noting further passages like Leviticus 23:7, 15, 35-36, he does anticipate a transfer of the Sabbath from the seventh day to a Lord’s Day commemoration on the first day. What is important to recognize, though, is how many Christians—albeit with great variance throughout the centuries—have adhered to what can at least be regarded as a Sabbath-principle. Resting on a day dedicated entirely, or at least mainly, to God, will not be demeaned by mature Christian people.

20:9-10a The Fourth Commandment directs, “Six days shall you work and accomplish all your work; but on the seventh day is Sabbath to HASHEM, your God” (ATS). The first six days of the week are intended for work, although two terms appear in the Hebrew source text: *ta’avod v’asita kol-melakhah* (תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתְּךָ), which includes the verb *avad* (עָבַד) and the noun *melakhah* (מְלַאכָה), hence the more common rendering “you shall labor and do all your work” (RSV/NRSV/ESV, NASU, NIV, NJPS, et. al.).

⁴ *HALOT*, 1:270.

⁵ Sarna, *Exodus*, 111.

⁶ Durham, 289.

⁷ Kaiser, in *EXP*, 2:424.

Throughout the Tanach, *melakhah* (מְלָאכָה) or “work” involves an array of applications, including: “trade mission, business journey,” “business, work,” and “handiwork, craftsmanship” (*HALOT*),⁸ generally some kind of skilled labor. Biblically, for certain, what would be considered prohibited work for the Sabbath is described in further Tanach passages (i.e., 34:21; 35:3; Numbers 15:32-36; Amos 8:5; Jeremiah 17:21-22; Nehemiah 13:15-21). In the Rabbinic tradition, the major examples of prohibited work (m.*Shabbat* 7:2) would be derived from the sorts of labor employed to build the Tabernacle (31:13-17; 35:2).⁹ But also important, given the Leviticus 18:5 intention of the Torah being a cause of life, and not death for keeping its commandments, is how Sarna mentions the widespread Jewish view, “Of course, all Sabbath prohibitions are suspended when human life is deemed to be in danger (*pikkuah nefesh*)—in such a situation it is a religious duty to violate them if that is what is required to save a life [b.*Yoma* 85a-b].”¹⁰

20:10b A wide variety of examiners recognize how the Sabbath or *Shabbat* is to be an institution which is to affect far more than just native, ethnic Israelites, but all who may compose the community: *u'benekha u'bitekha avdekha v'behemtekha v'gerekha asher b'she'arekha* (אֲתֶהּ וּבְנֵיךָ וּבְתִיבְךָ עַבְדֶּךָ וַאֲמִתֶּךָ וּבְהֵמֶתֶךָ וּגְרֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ), “you or-son-of-you or-daughter-of-you manservant-of-you or-maidservant-of-you or-animal-of-you or-alien-of-you who within-gates-of-you” (Kohlenberger).¹¹

Some of the first classifications of those who are to have a Sabbath rest, are too easily glossed over: Israelite sons and daughters are not permitted to work. Are we to assume that many, upon hearing that the seventh day was the Sabbath, might have thought of it only being relevant or applicable to male ethnic Israelite fathers, or at least ethnic Israelite parents? But their children are to rest too, as are their servants and their animals and anyone else staying within the community.

Within today’s Messianic movement, it is the identity of the *ger* (גֵּר) in v. 10b, which can stimulate a wide degree of debate, as the *ger* is often believed to represent the place of today’s non-Jewish Messianic Believers (cf. Ephesians 2:19). Lexically, it is often defined along the lines of “sojourner” (*BDB*)¹² or “protected citizen, stranger” (*HALOT*),¹³ being associated with the verb *gur* (גִּיר), widely meaning “sojourn” (*BDB*).¹⁴ English translations vary on how to render *ger* in v. 10b, including: “sojourner” (RSV/ESV, NASU, Alter), “alien” (NIV), “stranger” (NJPS, Jerusalem Bible-Koren, Keter Crown Bible), “immigrant” (Common English Bible), “foreigner” (CJB), or “outsider” (TLV). The *ger* was an outsider, who had entered into the community of Israel, is widely agreed to have acknowledged Israel’s God, and was usually poor if not destitute. Tigay, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, describes, “the resident alien was, at least in some cases, dependent on a specific individual.”¹⁵

⁸ *HALOT*, 1:586.

⁹ Cf. Sarna, Exodus, 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Kohlenberger, 1:201.

¹² *BDB*, 158.

¹³ *HALOT*, 1:201.

¹⁴ *BDB*, 157.

¹⁵ Tigay, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 150.

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From the text of Exodus 20:10b, the *ger* or sojourner within the community of Ancient Israel, was expected to observe the weekly *Shabbat* in the same manner as the Israelite fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, servants, and animals were. Yet among Jewish examiners, this is not always agreed. A. Cohen argues in the *Soncino Chumash*, “the stranger is forbidden to do work on the Sabbath for an Israelite, but may do so for himself. Some explain *stranger* to mean a proselyte who has embraced the religion of Israel; he becomes subject to the laws of Sabbath observance.”¹⁶ The view that the *ger* of v. 10b, is what would later be the proselyte or “convert” (ATS) of Second Temple Judaism,¹⁷ has been debated in Biblical Studies.¹⁸ The text of v. 10b prescribes a Sabbath rest for the *ger* or sojourner in the community, just as everyone else was to have a Sabbath rest.

In later Judaism, some would have a non-Jewish neighbor often conduct some menial work for the Jewish home on the Sabbath—the proverbial “Sabbath *goy*”—who would be able to seemingly violate prohibitions like lighting a fire. It cannot go unnoticed how the Qumran community would have opposed such a practice, instead adhering to the restriction, “One may not send a Gentile to do his business on the Sabbath day” (CD 11.1).¹⁹ This is certainly more in keeping with the tenor of the Exodus 20:8-11 instruction.

Jewish interpreters like Sarna do appreciably ascribe a significance for the Sabbath, not only beyond ethnic Israel, but for what the Sabbath communicates about human equality, dignity, and the protection of the oppressed:

“By proscribing work and creativity on that day, and by enjoining the inviolability of nature one day a week, the Torah delimits human autonomy and restores nature to its original state of pristine freedom. Human liberty is immeasurably enhanced, human equality is strengthened, and the cause of social justice is promoted by legislating the inalienable right of every human being, irrespective of social class, and of draft animals as well, to twenty-four hours of complete rest every seven days....In the ancient world strangers were often without rights and were without the protection of the law. The Torah is particularly sensitive to their feelings and solicitous of their needs and welfare.”²⁰

Durham similarly concurs,

¹⁶ Cohen, *Chumash*, 461.

¹⁷ Defined by *Jastrow*, 263 with “a proselyte, convert to Judaism.”

¹⁸ The Septuagint did render the *ger* (גֵּר) as *prosēlutos* (προσήλυτος), which the LXE has as “stranger,” and the NETS as “guest,” and some would indeed take *prosēlutos* as being akin to “proselyte,” one who has formally converted to the religion of Israel or Judaism.

The degree to which *prosēlutos* is akin to the later Second-First Century B.C.E. concept of a Jewish proselyte, has been debated. *AMG* further notes, as its first description for *prosēlutos*, “masc. noun from *prosērchomai*...to come near, come to. A stranger, foreigner, one who comes from his own people to another” (Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1231). David M. Moffit and C. Jacob Butera. “P.Duk. inv. 727r: New Evidence for the Meaning and Provenance of the Word Προσήλυτος” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 no. 1 (2013):159-178 documents examples from pre-Septuagintal Egypt of how *prosēlutos* was used in a neutral context as “foreigner” or “sojourner,” and not “proselyte” of the late Second Temple period.

For a further evaluation, consult the sub-section “*Ger* and *Proselutos*: Is the Torah also only for proselytes?”, appearing in the article “Approaching One Law Controversies” by J.K. McKee, in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

¹⁹ Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 68.

²⁰ Sarna, *Exodus*, pp 112-113.

"The singular pronoun 'you' (*atah*, אַתָּה) is supplemented by a list of six potential sources of labor, taking in the family, the employees, the work-animals and even the visitor stopping temporarily with the Israelite. The detailed specification of this expansion is sometimes attributed to humanitarian concern...More likely, it is an attempt to plug obvious loopholes: not only is the Israelite not to work on the sabbath, neither is anyone else, or even any animal, that might conceivably be doing his work for him."²¹

Terence E. Fretheim interweaves a number of key points on the different strata of people expected to have a Sabbath rest. He states, "every discussion of the sabbath should be decisively informed by the fact that this day is a divine gift to the world, not a burden,"²² and then proceeds to quote from his own translation of Yeshua's word of Mark 2:27, "The sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath." Freitheim draws the firm conclusion, "The sabbath is a fundamentally egalitarian institution. The sabbath rest is for all, rich and poor, master and servant, human beings and animals."²³

20:11 The seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is described as something to be associated with God's own cessation from His work in creating the universe: "For in six days, *ADONAI* made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. This is why *ADONAI* blessed the day, *Shabbat*, and separated it for himself" (CJB). Noting the Sabbath as something blessed by God, Sarna observes how "It is an integral part of the divinely ordained cosmic order and exists independent of human effort."²⁴ With all strata of persons for sure, enjoined to have a Sabbath rest (v. 10b), and with the Sabbath connected to the Creator's own cessation from work here in v. 11, commentators are not at all unjustified to conclude that **the Sabbath is an inclusive institution given by God**—and not only this, but that the Sabbath communicates something beyond just a seventh day of rest. Fretheim makes the striking observations,

"It is not simply something for Israel to keep; even animals and strangers are to honor it. Yet the divine rest is more than a humanitarian gesture or a paradigm for creaturely resting—because God did so, the creatures should. It is a religious act with cosmic implications....To keep the sabbath is to participate in God's intention for the rhythm of creation. Not keeping the sabbath is a violation of the created order; it returns one aspect of that order to chaos. What the creatures do with the sabbath has cosmic effects. Such lines of thought may help explain the death penalty which Israel attaches to sabbath-keeping (31:12-17; 35:2); the order of creation is at stake."²⁵

Fretheim basically says that to fail to keep the Sabbath (which for him as a Protestant Christian is probably Sunday), is to initiate a breach in God's Creation order. And it is true that in the Torah, Sabbath violation would merit capital punishment (Exodus 31:15; Numbers 15:32-35). Even with a limitation of thinking that the seventh-day Sabbath was later transferred to Sunday, J.A. Motyer does astutely point out, "To what extent the New Testament reaffirms capital punishment is a matter of dispute, as is the question of the death penalty today. But in any case, the Old Testament witnesses to the seriousness with

²¹ Durham, 289.

²² Fretheim, *Exodus*, 229.

²³ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁴ Sarna, *Exodus*, 111.

²⁵ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 229.

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which offences against the Decalogue were regarded and, at the very least, this seriousness should be reflected in modern practice.”²⁶ This writer would affirm that capital punishment for Sabbath-breaking was absorbed onto Yeshua the Messiah sacrificed (cf. Colossians 2:14). But, the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath should not be dismissed, given how violation of it once carried the death penalty; **this can only highlight the Sabbath’s continuity for the people of God.**

And with the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* being associated with God’s Creation in v. 11, we cannot overlook some of the factors brought out by R. Alan Cole, at least mentioning how the Sabbath may have had some pre-Mosaic and pre-Israelite origins:

“Argument has raged as to the origins and date of sabbath observance: later Jewish commentators tried hard to find evidence of sabbath observance in patriarchal days but, apart from the law, the earliest references are 2 Kings 4:23 and Amos 8:5. The passage from Kings suggests worship as well as cessation from work, as being an early feature of the day (as it certainly was in post-exilic times)...It is highly likely that the origins of sabbath (like the origins of tithing and circumcision) go back well beyond the law, even though there is no direct biblical evidence for its observance.”²⁷

Exodus 20:8-11 application Both Jewish and Christian traditions over the centuries have taken significant guidance from the Fourth Commandment as detailed in Exodus 20:8-11—traditions from which today’s Messianic people widely benefit. The former has often applied the Sabbath commandment to significant home and synagogue traditions of rest, communal worship, and Torah study. The latter has often applied it to communal worship on the first day of the week, and to a time for fellowship among family and fellow Believers. Even with some limitations being present among those Christians of the past who believed the Sabbath was changed to Sunday, we should believe that the Lord will still honor them, for their wanting to honor Him.

J.H. Hertz rightfully lauds the weekly *Shabbat* as an institution which has had a greatly positive impact upon the Jewish people over the centuries:

“Religious worship and religious instruction—the renewal of man’s spiritual life in God—form an essential part of Sabbath observance. We therefore sanctify the Sabbath by a special Sabbath liturgy, by statutory Lessons from the Torah and the Prophets, and by attention to discourse and instruction by religious teachers. The Sabbath has thus proved the great educator of Israel in the highest education of all; namely the laws governing human conduct. The effect of these Sabbath prayers and Synagogue homilies upon the Jewish people has been incalculable.”²⁸

Reflecting a view of the Sabbath being transferred to Sunday, but still with a high view of the Sabbath as a Protestant Christian, Motyer directs contemporary Believers to make it a time when the normal business of life decisively changes, and this is made a unique day among seven:

“[I]f it was to be a day of holy rest, it required thoughtful preparation and pre-planning. Because of this, we can summarize by saying that the Sabbath commandment is

²⁶ Motyer, *Exodus*, 218 fn#14.

²⁷ Cole, *Exodus*, 158.

²⁸ Hertz, 297.

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concerned with how life as a whole is to be ordered under God. It may even be that in the increasing complication of modern life, if the Lord's Day is to be kept 'special', ever more and more organization of life—business, shopping, homework, whatever—becomes necessary so that this unique day dominates the pattern of ordinary days. In any case, this is one aspect of Sabbath law. It encapsulates our life with God...²⁹

²⁹ Motyer, *Exodus*, 218.